



The animal was partially hidden, so I waited for it to step out from the brush and present a suitable shot. Such a contest of nerves is often associated with big game animals in heavily wooded areas. In this case, however, the game was a squirrel and the woods just a shelterbelt in northern Cass County. Smaller game, smaller woods, but a good way to spend an October afternoon a few miles from home, especially when time is short.

I knew squirrels were abundant in that shelterbelt, having bowhunted it in September. I had filled my bow tag and didn't have enough time to drive a long distance to hunt birds, so squirrels gave me an opportunity to hunt close to home.

# Squirrels and Rabbits: Hunting an Overlooked Resource

By Marty Egeland  
Photos By Harold Umber

*Above: The red squirrel is familiar to woodland hunters because it is highly territorial and scolds interlopers with noisy chatter. It is small and found most frequently in northeast North Dakota.*

*Right: Cottontails can be found in every area of the state, in many different habitats. They are prone to dramatic highs and lows in their population levels and may go from plentiful to scarce in local areas rather quickly.*



*We were hesitant to eat the “bushy-tailed rats,” but wanting to be polite, my mother dutifully cooked them up. We were surprised at how good they tasted.*

Deer hunting, particularly for white-tailed deer, is arguably North Dakota’s most popular hunting activity. Waterfowling brings in hunters from all over the country, and who doesn’t get excited by a flushing ringneck pheasant. With so many high-profile outdoor activities, however, squirrel and rabbit hunting often get lost in the mix.

In other areas of the country with fewer opportunities to hunt other game species, rabbit and squirrel hunting reigns supreme. Since many hunters in North Dakota view rabbits and squirrels as secondary options, or not at all, competition when hunting them is not a problem. It is pretty easy in North Dakota to find a place where a person can enjoy a few hours of simple pleasure pursuing rabbits and squirrels.

To hunt rabbits and squirrels, all you need to find is a brushy area or shelterbelt to which you have access. Often such places are within two or three miles driving distance of our major cities – or any city. All you need is a couple hours of free time and a little knowledge of local geography.

Rabbit hunters and rabbit harvest have increased in recent years, with the exception of last year when both hunter numbers and harvest fell. Squirrel harvest was up slightly in 2001, while squirrel hunter numbers were down slightly from 2000. If the trend of reduced access to hunt more popular game species continues, rabbit and squirrel hunting will likely become more popular.

### Equipment Needed

Expensive equipment is not necessary to hunt squirrels or rabbits. Blue jeans, a flannel shirt and grandpa’s .22 rimfire or shotgun will suffice. There are benefits to each weapon. If you are hunting with a

shotgun you can shoot other species that happen to be in season such as grouse or pheasant. A .22 rimfire, on the other hand, will damage little meat and you won’t have to deal with annoying shotgun shell pellets in your game meat.

People wishing for a different experience can experiment with handguns, muzzle-loaders, or archery gear. However, keep in mind that the diminutive .22 will cast a bullet well over a mile. In some instances, such as an area where farm homes are a short distance apart, a small bore shotgun is a more suitable weapon. Generally, I prefer to use a .22, but if a person is going to shoot at a squirrel in a tree, make sure that the tree is behind the squirrel to catch the bullet in the event of a miss or pass through.

North Dakota has gray squirrels, fox squirrels, red squirrels, and northern flying squirrels. The gray and fox squirrels are hunted most often, as they are larger and are good table fare.

My favorite hunting technique is to go to an area that has a good squirrel population a couple of hours before sunset, relax and wait for squirrels to become active and visible. Some people also wander around the woods looking for squirrels. This is most effective if you stop and sit still awhile to allow frightened squirrels to come out again. Once you have had an opportunity, move to a new spot and try again.

I haven’t hunted squirrels with a dog, but this method is popular in many other states. Hunters often use small dogs like terriers, but there are dogs specifically bred to hunt squirrels. When a squirrel sights a human it often hides on the other side of the tree. A good squirrel dog is supposed to go to the other side of the tree and bark, causing the squirrel to go around the other side and offer a shot.

### Rabbit, Squirrel Harvest

	Tree Squirrels	Cottontail Rabbits
2001 Harvest	11,104	14,336
2001 Hunters	2,338	3,308
2000 Harvest	10,963	24,249
2000 Hunters	2,502	4,707
1999 Harvest	11,847	17,896
1999 Hunters	2,532	4,045
1998 Harvest	11,955	15,713
1998 Hunters	3,007	3,590

Photo Omitted

## Rabbits and Hares

In North Dakota, we have the opportunity to hunt cottontail rabbits, jackrabbits, and in certain parts of the state such as the Turtle Mountains and the Pembina Hills, snowshoe hares.

When rabbit hunting, I usually just “walk the cover” much as I would do while hunting other game. In some circles, it is popular to hunt rabbits with hunting dogs. Most people don’t have a couple of beagles lying around, so bird dogs are used. Just about any bird dog will chase a rabbit, but to be a good rabbit dog it should stop at the flush.

Most bird dogs are quite fast and often stay too close to the rabbit to allow a safe shot. A bird dog, steady to flush, will offer more opportunities for a shot at a fleeing rabbit. I have hunted rabbits with dogs, and depending on the dog, it can be exciting. In areas where people hunt rabbits in wooded/brushy areas with trained rabbit dogs, the rabbit often runs in a circle, coming back by the hunter to offer a shot.

Another method of hunting rabbits, particularly jackrabbits in wide open spaces, is with a high powered rifle. High-power rifle bullets will usually damage some meat, but a shot through the head or front shoulder will leave the large back straps and hind quarters for the table.

A hunter would be hard pressed to find better table fare than cottontail rabbit. Jackrabbits and snowshoe hares, contrary to popular belief, are also tasty when prepared properly.

I was first introduced to eating rabbits and squirrels by hunters from Indiana, friends of my father, who came to North Dakota several years to hunt waterfowl. They usually brought a cooler full of cottontails and tree squirrels. We were hesitant to eat the “bushy-tailed rats,” but wanting to be polite, my mother dutifully cooked them up. We were surprised at how good they tasted. Cottontails are most often roasted, fried, or stewed. I usually cook squirrels and jackrabbits in a crock pot, or slowly in the oven for several hours to ensure tenderness.

Skinning a rabbit is easy and with a few cuts around the legs you can peel the hide right off. Squirrels on the other hand are tougher to skin and require a sharp knife.

I use the whole animal (rabbits and squirrels) and quarter them after skinning and dressing.

As far as squirrels are concerned, I was once told that you should just shoot and eat young squirrels. My problem is that I am not that good at telling the age of the squirrel before I shoot them. While I enjoy hunting a variety of game and get a little stretched trying to do it all, I still try to get a couple of meals a year from this untapped resource.

Shelterbelts often provide good habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including squirrels and rabbits. These farmstead belts are often posted to trespass for any number of reasons, but the prevention of rabbit or squirrel hunting is probably not high on the list.

Contact a few shelterbelt owners before hunting season to see if you can scout the area for rabbits and squirrels, and if it looks promising and you can get permission to hunt, come back at a time convenient to the landowner. From such efforts personal relationships are built, and you may discover good hunting close to home and available for the asking.

**MARTY EGELAND** is a Department outreach biologist stationed in Grand Forks.



## Squirrel in Gravy

3-4 squirrels  
1 onion chopped  
1 can of cream of mushroom soup  
Enough milk to thin out soup  
(about 1/2 cup)  
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce  
(optional)  
1/4 teaspoon garlic powder  
Salt and pepper to taste

Cook onion and squirrels in water until meat falls off the bone. A slow cooker is about perfect for this. Mix the rest of the ingredients together and add the deboned squirrel meat to it. Serve with rice.



## Roast Rabbit

1 rabbit  
1 cup flour  
1 tablespoon of sage  
1/2 teaspoon pepper  
1/2 stick of butter  
2 cups water  
1 onion

Cut rabbit into quarters. Mix flour and spices in a shallow bowl; roll rabbit pieces into flour mixture. Melt butter in frying pan and brown rabbit. Place rabbit in roaster with the water and butter left from the frying pan. Add onion. Bake for 1 1/2 hours at 350°. I make flour gravy with the drippings. Serve with potatoes and vegetables.